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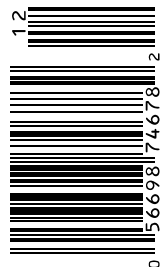
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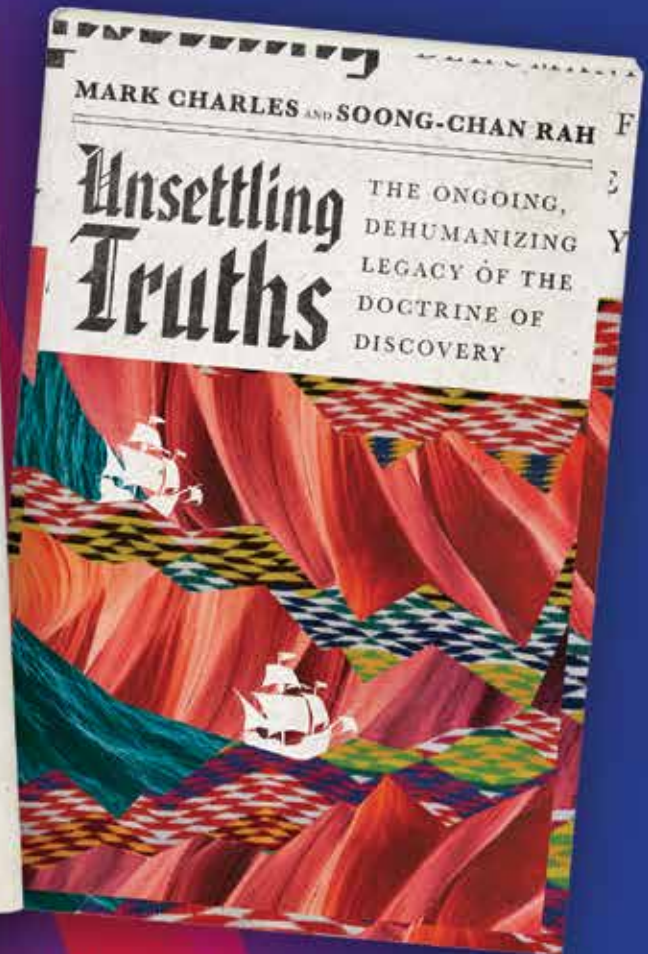
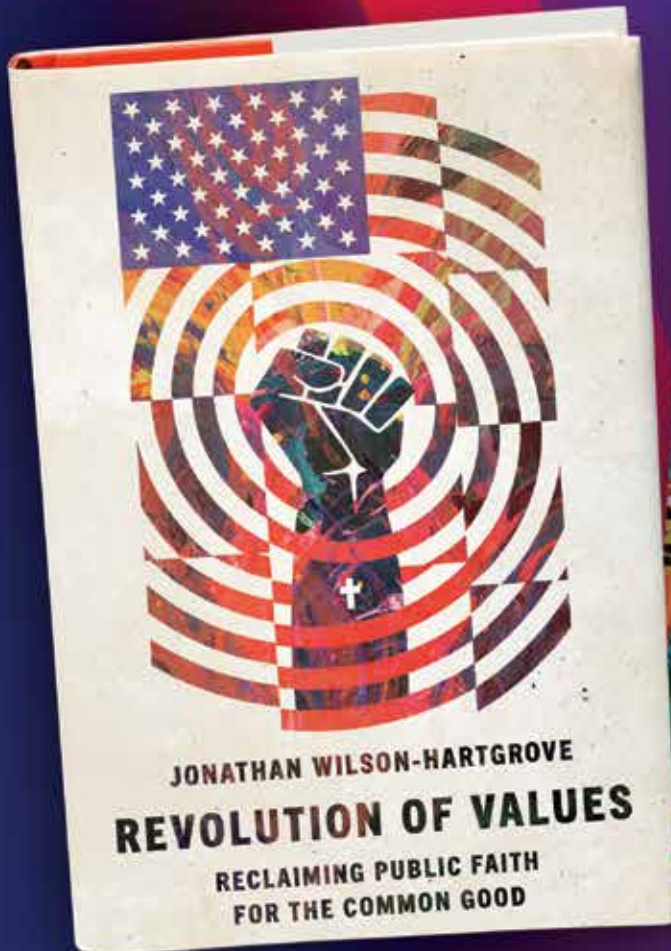
**IMPEACHMENT
TALK AT THE
THANKSGIVING
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PAGE 9

**INSIDE
AN
AMAZON
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PAGE 20

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“FOR ME, COVERING THIS BEAST WITH BEADS IS CATHARSIS.”

From Violence, Beauty

Around the world, artists transform objects of evil into works of art.

by Andrea Couture



22

28

All Women Welcome Fighting patriarchy is exhausting—one multifaith group of women created a place of refuge.

by Stephanie Russell-Kraft

32

A Way Out? Universal basic income is touted as a solution to our economic woes. But is it what workers need most?

by Danny Duncan Collum

Voices

6	Spotlight
9	Hearts & Minds Advent is a manifesto for turning the world upside down. by Jim Wallis
	Commentary
12	Palestine Jared Kushner's plan does nothing to further Middle East justice. by Mae Elise Cannon and Andrew Wickersham
14	First Nations A Canadian church models restitution to Indigenous peoples. by Virginia Doctor
15	Mary's Song The Magnificat as a call to action. by Nancy Frausto
	Columns
16	Under the Sun Poems, like prophets, say more with less. by Jeania Ree V. Moore
18	Deep Economy There's no plan for refreezing the Arctic. by Bill McKibben
19	Soul Work In my home, I am the faith gauge. by Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros
	Eyewitness
20	Once the clock starts, Amazon workers don't stop. by William Fellows



50



27

Vision

	Culture
39	Poetry Through words and silence, Robert Lax created space for grace to flow. by Robert Hirschfield
41	On Film Terrence Malik shows us how to be Christian in a time of bigotry. by Abby Olcese
42	Curated Being amazed in an anxious city. by Faith-Marie Zambé
	Reviews
43	Books The scandal of the adjunct instructor system. by Whitney Rio-Ross
44	Global service learning is alive in <i>Soul Space</i> . by Julianne Gage
45	Richard Rohr sees the divine image in everything. by Jon Little
	Poetry
46	Tonight a small globe is pierced by the Light. by Pamela S. Wynn
	Living the Word
48	Hope for some evokes fear in others. by Kenyatta R. Gilbert
	H'rumps
50	For Christmas, let's give Mitch McConnell a heart. by Ed Spivey Jr.

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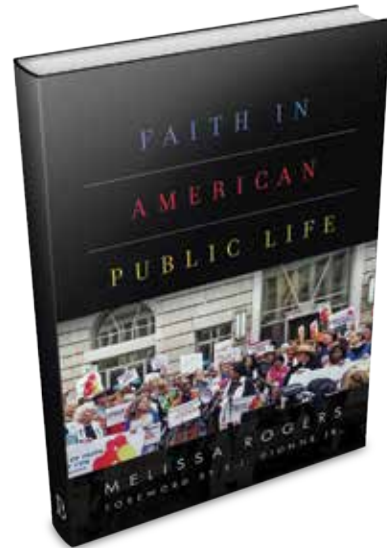
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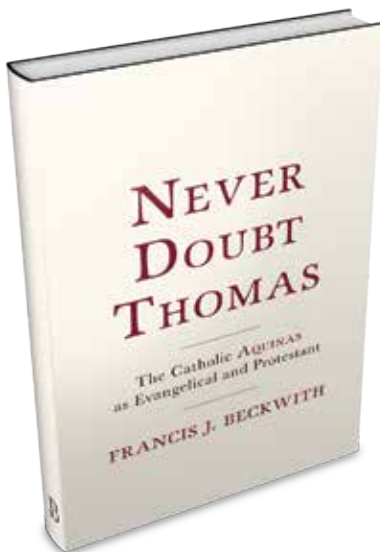
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From the Editor

Inspiration and encouragement can come from many places. For some, they're found in a lifetime of work from a literary giant. For others, they emerge, unexpectedly, from an indomitable 16-year-old prophet with preternatural vision and determination. And many of us are heartened, and challenged to see differently, by the inspired imagination of artists—from a poet who urges us to “discover the truth of wonder and rejoice in the silent voice of God” (p. 39) to creatives around the world who transform the tools of trauma into affirmations of healing, redemption, and resistance.

But art is not passive. For art to be meaningful, to be “successful,” requires engagement—and a willingness to allow our most closely held assumptions, norms, and habits of thinking and being to be shattered. Truly (and vulnerably) engaging with art requires moral courage, but it promises unexpected rewards as we're opened to new possibilities—and even new sources of inspiration in a world that sorely needs them.

RESPONSE

Different Pathways

Loving our neighbors means “placing ourselves in different pathways than those that are normal to us and our people,” wrote Jim Wallis in “Love Your Neighbor?” (November). “I was deeply moved by this article,” wrote Karen Macaleer. “It will be my go-to in explaining why I am changing from an all-white, very privileged church to a multiracial one.” Loving our neighbors also means revealing the truth. “My wife and I experienced abuse in our local body,” wrote one reader in response to D.L. Mayfield’s profile of whistleblower Wade Mullen (“This Is How We Let Abuse Thrive”). “It feels like a breath of fresh air to hear about transparency and confession.”

Write us: response@sojo.net



"AT SOME
POINT IN
LIFE THE
WORLD'S
BEAUTY
BECOMES
ENOUGH."

Toni Morrison
(1931-2019)

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Andrea Couture

After working in journalism and with various NGOs, Andrea Couture turned to the arts.

"Frankly, I was weary and saw art as the best of what we do after seeing too much of the worst." Her motivation to write about artists turning objects of violence into art (p.22) is similar: When it's "all too tempting" to throw our hands up in defeat, says Couture, it is "a big achievement to turn these obstacles around in a positive direction—heroic really—and a source of needed inspiration for the rest of us."



Robert Hirschfield

Since 2005, Robert Hirschfield has written for *Sojourners* about poetry and nonviolence—and often both. In this issue, Hirschfield profiles the late Robert Lax (p. 39), an abstract poet known for his friendship with Thomas Merton. "You don't run into many abstract poets who pursue a life of contemplative prayer, silence, and radical kindness," says Hirschfield. "Lax was singular as a poet and as a person."

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\$95
billion

Total value of the global arms trade in 2017.

36%

Percentage of global arms exports supplied by the U.S.

81%

Percentage of people in U.S. who say the arts are a "positive experience in a troubled world."



1

HEARTS & MINDS

BY JIM WALLIS

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

For some of us, the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays may be the only time all year that we see some of our relatives. Some probably harbor anxiety or even dread at the difficult conversations on politics and faith that surface during meals with family members who see the world very differently than you do.

In Advent, our thoughts turn to the meaning of Christ's coming and the deep significance of the season for followers of Jesus—"waiting" for him to come, which has special and poignant meaning for us in the deep political and moral crisis in which we find ourselves. In many ways Advent is my favorite liturgical season, because it demands of Christians that we do the work of preparing our hearts for what it means

**"THIS IS A HARD WORD
FOR COMFORTABLE
CHRISTIANS."**

“IT’S NOTHING LESS THAN A MANIFESTO FOR TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN.”

that God came and lived as one of us in a world that needed (and needs) to be changed.

It’s deeply important that we understand the radical meaning of Jesus’ birth as an event destined not just to culminate in a sacrifice for personal atonement and reconciliation, but also to radically transform the earth with the kingdom of God. From the beginning, the promise of good news for the poor and liberation for the oppressed defined the Incarnation. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53), said Mary, the mother of Jesus, who seemed to best understand the meaning of his coming. This is the Jesus who began his public ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah, saying “The Spirit of the Lord is

upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). This is nothing less than a manifesto for turning society and the world upside down.

That is a hard word for comfortable Christians, and many have literally never heard it in their churches. But bringing our conversations back to that gospel, in keeping with the season, is better than starting with our political divisions. This Jesus is very different from the one who’s been appropriated and held captive by political actors masquerading as religious figures, at no time more so than since the election of Donald Trump.

This Advent, we need to prepare for the Jesus who taught us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves—and remember that our neighbor is the one who is different from us. We need to prepare for the Jesus who teaches that the “least of these” are the most important, even as they are treated as the least important by many politicians.

For some of us, this may be the last time we’ll speak to that relative whose politics are very different from ours before what could be the most important election in our lifetime. So, as we prepare for this holiday season, let’s remember the original meaning of the incarnation of this radical Jesus and prayerfully search for what that means today. ♦



Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine.



MORAL INJURY IS A WAR INSIDE

No one should fight alone

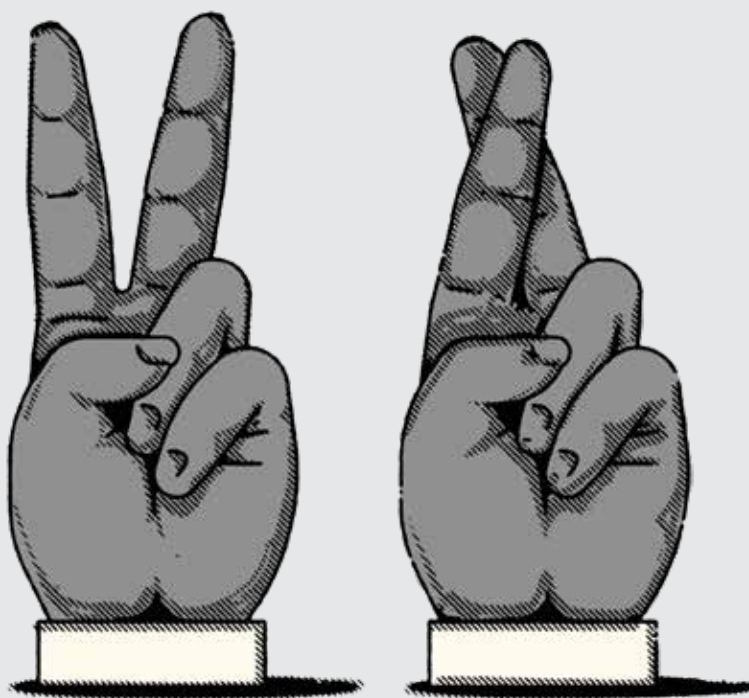
Imagine a nurse who blames herself for losing a patient. She questions her own self-worth and abuses painkillers to numb the constant emotional stress. She's one of the many who struggle with Moral Injury. At Volunteers of America, we can help her find peace.



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ART OF THE BAD DEAL

Jared Kushner's "Peace to Prosperity" plan fails the test for a peaceful Middle East.



2

In Jerusalem's Old City, prices are seldom posted. Negotiating is not only welcomed but necessary. It is customary for the merchant to initially ask for a price far in excess of what both parties know to be reasonable. When such an offer is made, it is perfectly valid for the customer to reject the offer; only then does the real negotiation begin. But if the merchant's counteroffers get progressively higher, it is perfectly justifiable for the customer to question whether the vendor is genuinely interested in selling.

For the past 30 years, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has often resembled a dysfunctional bazaar transaction. With each round of negotiations, Palestinians have been asked to pay a higher and higher price. The Trump administration plan released in June, called "Peace to Prosperity," is no exception. But why are its terms so unacceptable to Palestinians?

Palestinian political leadership has consistently expressed its aim to

establish a sovereign state in which the Palestinian people can exercise national self-determination. As Israeli-Palestinian peace talks over the past quarter century have demonstrated, the issues of borders, Israeli settlements, and Jerusalem are all negotiable to some extent, but any plan that requires Palestinians to relinquish the fundamental aim of national sovereignty is setting the price too high.

Two of the Trump administration's key architects for the plan, Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, have hinted at their opposition to anything more than limited Palestinian autonomy. Both have given evasive answers as to whether they think the two-state solution—a projected independent state of Palestine alongside the independent state of Israel—still serves as the blueprint for a peace deal. Greenblatt called the two-state solution “a phrase [that] leads to nothing.” Kushner stressed that “new and different ways to reach peace must be tried,” along with doubts about Palestinians' ability to self-govern. He also said that freedom from Israeli military and government interference was a “high bar” for a peace plan to achieve.

Considering such comments, the Trump administration plan seems to confirm Palestinians' worst fears. While the plan's terms appear generous—\$50 billion of foreign investment in infrastructure, private-sector growth, and social services over 10 years—it does nothing to further Palestinian self-determination.

By calling for the construction of “special access roads” in the West Bank and upgrading border crossings with the latest technology, the infrastructure plan anticipates the need to connect scattered territories under Palestinian administration, rather than a unified Palestinian state. The master fund, which will finance the various development projects, will disburse monies according to Palestinian ability to meet development benchmarks set by international investors. In short, “Peace for Prosperity” may offer Palestinians higher standards of living, but at the cost of substantive input into how their own economic resources are developed or utilized.

While the plan's weakness is apparent from a Palestinian perspective, how should Christian peacemakers respond? After almost a century of conflict, shouldn't Christians support any attempt to end

“A PALESTINIAN STATE IS AS NECESSARY FOR PEACE AS A SECURE ISRAEL.”

the bloodshed, no matter how imperfect?

The problem with this approach is that peace isn't only about political leaders from two nations signing a document. For peace to be lasting, the terms must convince both sides that the fundamental injustices at the root of a conflict have been satisfactorily rectified.

Israelis are clear that only a secure, internationally recognized Jewish state will constitute a just resolution. Most Christians accept and sympathize with this view. Palestinians also insist that only the establishment of a Palestinian sovereign state will rectify past injustices. Christians need to recognize that a Palestinian state is just as necessary for lasting peace as a secure Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah derided false priests who proclaimed “‘peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (8:11). Regardless of how enticing the terms may look on paper, there can be no true peace while injustices endure. However, insisting on a peace that offers “good news to the poor” and “freedom to the prisoners” and sets the oppressed free is a biblically sound negotiating position. ❖

Mae Elise Cannon is executive director and **Andrew Wickersham** is an Ambassador Warren Clark Fellow of Churches for Middle East Peace.



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BY VIRGINIA DOCTOR



A LONG ROAD TO RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

The Anglican Church of Canada models restitution to Indigenous communities.

A few months ago, I was driving from Peterborough, Ontario, to my home at Six Nations Reserve. The route took me through the traditional homelands of the Anishinaabe.

I began to feel and smell the spirit of the ancestors. On the right were farmlands; on the left, townhouses. In the distance, I could see the metropolis of Toronto. This is where Anishinaabe walked, hunted, gathered, and lived for years before first contact with Europeans. When the settlers came, they built structures to suit their needs. They took over the land by force, trickery, and other means. The concept of buying and selling land is absent from the Indigenous way of life. You cannot sell what the Creator has given you.

Many churches in Canada were built on Indigenous land, first by the Church of England and then the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC). Six Anglican churches were built on the Six Nations where I live. They are a part of my Anglican history; I can trace my Anglican roots to the early 1700s. It is a rich history. And complicated.

The ACC operated a number of residential schools for Indigenous children, where many students were abused—physically, emotionally, and sexually. In 1993, the ACC began addressing residential school system atrocities by promoting a process of reconciliation, including making restitution for harm. The church established a Healing Fund to promote projects that help individuals and communities heal from the trauma. Many abuse survivors have received cash. These projects seek

to restore what was lost—language, culture, innocence, family, belonging, traditional values, and ceremonies.

The ACC acknowledges that the Doctrine of Discovery, rooted in 15th century papal edicts and asserting that “lands not inhabited by Christians were empty, unowned, and available to be discovered and claimed,” shaped both the residential school system and the takeover of the land. The loss of land, however, has not yet been reconciled.

Last spring, the Diocese of New Westminster in British Columbia passed a resolution to tithe church property sales to Indigenous causes. The resolution suggested that 5 percent of proceeds from these sales be returned to the Indigenous Nations and communities who are the ancestral caretakers of that land, for use as they see fit; 2.5 percent be used to fund Indigenous ministries in the diocese; and another 2.5 percent go to the Indigenous Ministries department of the ACC to support the planned self-determining Indigenous Anglican Church. Those behind the resolution—including Vivian Seegers, the first Indigenous woman to be ordained in that diocese—are committed to seeing it to fruition. It is a bold step toward reconciliation.

In July, the General Synod of the ACC established a Jubilee Commission made up of “settler” and Indigenous members to address the loss of Indigenous land. The commission is charged with “examining historic and current funds made available for Indigenous ministries at various levels of the church’s structure, assessing current funds designated to Indigenous programming, and assessing broader property questions.”

I was raised on the Onondaga Nation Territory, south of Syracuse, N.Y. The last time I drove through, I saw the historic Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd among the Onondagas, where my grandmother was a steadfast member. I almost cried. It was abandoned in the 1990s. Last I heard, the land was returned to the Onondaga Nation, but the church is still in disrepair. If it was returned to the Nation, that’s good. But either way, the spirit of that land lives on. ✕

Virginia Doctor (Mohawk from Six Nations) is Indigenous Ministries coordinator for the Anglican Church of Canada.

E

MARY'S SONG OF SANCTUARY

We hold on to the promise that Mary knew her child would bring.

Every empire in human history has used the tactics of fear. This fear is evident in the fact that for generations a dark skin hue has automatically made a person at best suspect, at worst a criminal. The empire identifies those whose language and nationality are different as less than human. Dehumanization becomes a tool to justify heinous laws, promoting them as necessary to protect citizens from a horde of savages, criminals, rapists, thugs, or whatever new word is used to instill fear.

Our sacred texts tell the stories of emperors, rulers, and pharaohs who justified mass extermination to maintain power. Herod the Great is one example. Herod was a ruler so deranged and paranoid about losing power that he had his wife, brother-in-law, and three sons murdered to wipe away any trace of royal blood who might challenge his throne.

It is under Herod's rule that we encounter the revolutionary words of Mary as she proclaims her song of praise, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). For generations, Christians have reduced the Magnificat to a simplistic, spiritual song from a docile, obedient girl chosen by God. The political undertones and demands for justice against rulers and laws that oppress God's people are rarely elevated.

In this Advent season, when the Christian community prepares for the birth of a long-promised "prince of peace" and hundreds of people wait in hope at the southern U.S. border, let us reclaim Mary's song as a call to action. Let us read and sing the Magnificat as a call to create and to be a sanctuary for our immigrant siblings who suffer under the inhumane and wicked thumb of the oppressor.

People of faith must defy the cruel laws that put so many children of God in cages for having the audacity to seek a better life.



Families walking miles for safety, those caught in a broken immigration system, and immigrant toddlers forced to appear alone in court are depending on us. As we actively await the birth of Christ, it is our moral responsibility to fight for safe places for all who are crushed and brutalized. Christians need to be as loud for love and justice as those who spew hate.

When Mary spoke her words of praise, she trusted in a God who always has and always will liberate the oppressed. Mary knew that in her womb she carried a child who would topple empires and lift up the marginalized. We too must cry out in joy for the blessings bestowed upon us. As we see images of children crying out for mercy for their detained or deported parents, we too must cry out—this is a time for sanctuary!

How will people of faith become accomplices to Mary's cry for sanctuary? We need sanctuary for those persecuted by a tyrannical ruler's insatiable hunger for power. Sanctuary for that child born in Bethlehem so long ago. Sanctuary for the family escaping poverty and death threats. Sanctuary for all.

The promise we have is that empires will fall and braggart rulers cease. The hungry will feast and those persecuted will find peace. We hold on to this promise that Mary knew her child would bring. Her song of praise was a prelude to Jesus' ministry. As followers of that child Jesus, we are confident in knowing who Jesus stands with. ✪

**"EMPIRES WILL
FALL AND
BRAGGART RULERS
CEASE."**

Nancy Frausto, a DACA recipient, is associate rector at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Long Beach, Calif.

TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

3



Like many people, I have spoken out more times than I can count under the literal and metaphorical banner of “Silence Is Violence,” my voice growing louder and louder in the past several years.

Yet recently, on one matter, I found myself having fewer words, not more. Gun violence rendered me mute.

The death counts that rise in real time. The fact that before we have comprehended one shooting, another has occurred. The relativizing of value and shifting calculus of loss we have begun to accommodate this “new normal.” The reality—contrary to what one would think based on media attention and political rhetoric—that mass shootings account for less than 2 percent of U.S. gun violence (suicides, by contrast, account

**“I FELT THE NEED TO
FALL SILENT IN SEARCH
OF DEEPER, TRUER
EXPRESSION.”**

for nearly 66 percent).

Ubiquitous, normalized gun violence left me wordless and weary, struggling to articulate out of a mix of rage, hurt, fear, and cynicism. I assumed this was “advocacy burnout,” but soon realized there was something more. It wasn’t simply the issue that exhausted me; it was language. I was experiencing the failure of political speech, the paucity of words—mine and others’—in the public arena. I felt the need to fall silent in search of deeper, truer expression.

I found it in language grounded by poetry. *Bullets into Bells: Poets and Citizens Respond to Gun Violence* contains poems accompanied by responses from gun violence survivors, family members, and activists. When I read this anthology last year, I was further stripped of speech. Its truth-telling demands that we shut up and listen and really see what is happening in gun violence. For example, in the opening of Mark Doty’s poem “In Two Seconds,” 12-year-old Tamir Rice is a sunflower whose astral brilliance, years in the making, has been suddenly snuffed out. The enormity of that collapse yields an absence not unlike a black hole: a gaping wound in time and space, a vacuum of reason.

Poems say more with less.

Prophets, I think, do the same.

Many of us are protesting today out of a strong desire for prophetic witness, an honest need for truth. Now is the time for prophets, on countless issues. My experience tells me this means listening as much as speaking out. In addition to prophets excoriating wayward kings, the Bible showcases wordlessness as a route to truth. Romans even marks it as divine, depicting the Spirit interceding for us with sighs or groans “too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

At the end of his poem’s opening stanza, Doty rephrases as a question the words Jesus often said to close a parable: “Who has eyes to see, or ears to hear?” As in scripture, so, too, here: These words challenge, invite, direct. Jesus’ parabolic refrain asks us to cut through all the noise and tune in to a deeper frequency within the fray. ❖

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a United Methodist deacon who writes theological aesthetics, practices the arts, and works in faith-based social justice in Washington, D.C.

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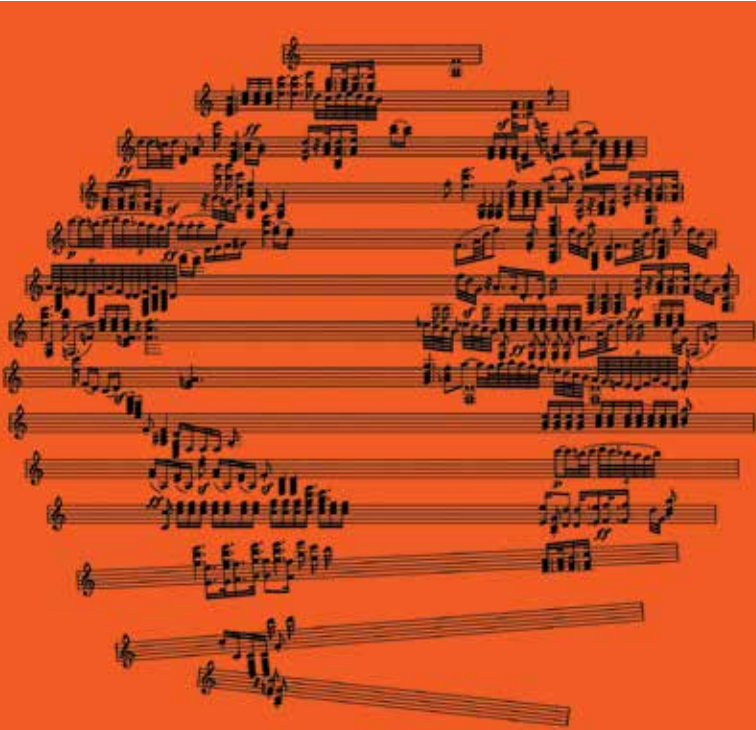
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DEEP ECONOMY

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

THE MOMENT TO DECIDE



S

Since most of America seems to wake up most days looking for something to be outraged by, I try to keep my indignation in check. Still, the news that members of North America's Hymn Society had chosen "Holy, Holy, Holy!" as the greatest hymn of all time—beating "Amazing Grace" in an early round by a 70-30 margin—struck

me as an affront to all that is good and, well, holy. Sure, who doesn't like singing a resonant Anglican ode to the tenets of trinitarian theology? But up against "Amazing Grace"? C'mon, now.

I'm actually a little used to this kind of hymnal-based resentment, because some years ago denominations began actually removing one of my great favorites, "Once to Every Man and Nation." As the head of the Episcopal hymnal committee put it, James Russell Lowell's great poem, written at the height of the crisis over slavery, was unorthodox because "its basic premise denies the fact that God repeatedly forgives his people and gives them more than one opportunity to amend their lives."

**"THERE'S NOT A PLAN FOR
REFREEZING THE ARCTIC
ONCE IT MELTS."**

I lack the theological firepower to argue the point, but I take comfort from the fact that it was one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s favorite hymns, and that he quoted from it in speech after speech. And I think it's especially resonant now, because it captures the actual dimensions of the great crisis we currently face, the rapidly disappearing chance to slow the heating of the earth God gave us. "Once to every man and nation / comes the moment to decide / In the strife of truth with falsehood / for the good or evil side." This time last year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said that unless we cut carbon emissions by half by 2030, our chances of meeting even the most modest climate targets agreed to at Paris were slim to none. And I think anyone who thinks about the speed at which civilizations move will agree that the space between now and 2030 qualifies, in political time, as "once." We either make our move or we don't.

We have a good idea what that move looks like: The Green New Deal, for instance, lays out a practical path to building renewable energy at high speed, refurbishing buildings, pushing hard to make trains and transit workable again. Given the rapid falls in the price of solar and wind power, it's achievable if we go all out.

But we won't get a second chance. If we wait until, say, 2030 to get started, we'll keep passing hideous tipping points, ones we have no way of retreating from. There's not a plan for refreezing the Arctic once it melts.

So I'm with Lowell, and with Dr. King. We face a time-limited choice, and if we skip it "the choice goes by forever / 'twixt the darkness and the light." Choose boldly! ♦

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*



TEXTS FOR SURVIVAL

Each week in my immigration-literature graduate seminar, we examine one book that focuses on the immigrant experience. So far, we have read about Norwegian, Italian, and Japanese experiences. Our upcoming texts center the experiences of Polish Jews, Koreans, Nigerians, Senegalese, Mexicans, and Muslims, among many others. Faith plays a central role in each book we've read so far, both fiction and nonfiction. In each text, the matriarch of the family brings the faith of her mother country into the United States. The matriarchs are themselves the texts for the survival of the faith in these families.

In my family, my grandmother was the compass for our faith traditions. We grew up Catholic and later became nondenominational. We explored many expressions of faith before we found one that fit. As a family, we retained many of our Catholic traditions, because they are woven into who we are. It's a complicated relationship, and one that we greatly value.

My maternal great-great-grandparents are from northern Mexico, a generation of family that did not cross the

border—the Texas/Mexico border crossed us when lines were redrawn. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents did not immigrate to Texas, they were born here. From their Mexican Catholic heritage, they brought rosaries, holy water, and the experiences of weaving Ojos de Dios to protect our homes. They also brought with them knowledge of how to use copal and *agua de florida* to bless our living spaces and repeated instructions on where exactly to place a glass of water underneath our beds to keep the nightmares at bay.

Our current political climate is mired in violent rhetoric toward immigrant families and those who live in the liminal spaces of cultures. This rhetoric ignited a man to drive more than five hours to open fire on a Latinx community, his violence rooted in the assumption that people who had perhaps been here for generations were “invaders” to this country. In the face of evil, people in El Paso—as have others around the globe—rose strong in love, community, and faith.

In my home, I am the faith gauge. Whatever temperature my faith happens to be on a given day, my family feeds off that energy. I've learned that centering God before myself provides essential grounding when yet another tragedy unfolds. These days, this seems a daily occurrence.

Literature, including biblical stories, is a big part of my life. I learn so much from reading the experiences of those unlike myself. As I recently read a news report about a man in my own city who continues to threaten a “bloodbath” in my predominantly Latinx community, I remembered Tamar's resilient efforts to earn her place in Judah's family, to give hope and possibility to her and her future children. It is the same faith I see in the matriarch who immigrates, whether by choice or design, so that her family and their stories will survive. ✱

**“I LEARN SO MUCH
FROM THE
EXPERIENCES OF
THOSE UNLIKE
MYSELF.”**

Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros is a Tejana, Chicana, and Mujerista from San Antonio, Texas, where she is a graduate student at Our Lady of the Lake University. She is the 2019 Recipient of the Rubem Alves Award in Theopoetics.

EYEWITNESS

4



"IT FEELS LIKE
A MODERN-DAY
SWEATSHOP TO ME."

THE COST OF TWO-DAY SHIPPING

"My shift actually starts at 6:30 a.m., but I punch in at 6:25, get my coffee, and then we have a thing called 'stand up' where the managers talk about safety, what they expect for the day, and building announcements. They try to motivate people to pick faster. And then you'll go to your station and you'll start your job. In my case, it's picking.

The screens display which item I need to pick out of a particular bin, and I'll pick that item and put it in the yellow tote. Once the tote is full enough, I'll set it down and replace it with another tote. That's pretty much what I do for my whole 10-and-a-half-hour shift.

We get a 30-minute break at 10 a.m., after four and a half hours. Our next break is from 1:30 p.m. until 2. And then we work until 5 p.m. Yesterday I picked 1,300 items the first period. Second period I picked over 900 items.

It feels like a modern-day sweatshop to me. You're very limited if you need to get a drink of water or use the facilities to relieve yourself. Everything is based on time, pretty much. If you're not doing your job, they call it 'time off task,' and you're penalized. Once the clock starts, you don't stop until your break time. It's just continuous work.

One of my grandmothers was Baptist and one was Pentecostal, so I kind of fluctuated between them both. Both taught me 'treat others as you would like to be treated.' Would you want someone to mistreat you, use you? You wouldn't like that very much. I don't think anyone would. So basically, treat me the way you would want to be treated, respect me like I respect you. I don't think we are treated as such at Amazon." ❖

William Fellows is a picker at Amazon MSP1 in Shakopee, Minn. He spoke with *Sojourners* associate editor Betsy Shirley about working in a warehouse for the online retailer.

FROM VIOLENCE, BEAUTY

TRANSFORMING 'SOMETHING
CREATED FOR EVIL' INTO ART.

BY ANDREA COUTURE



Hannah Arendt said we can ask of life, even in the darkest of times, a “redemptive element,” and art can be that—an affirmation of right, light, truth, some beleaguered beauty. But note well: Art is no escape from the problems of the world but, rather, a repurposing, a resistance. And, of course, this phenomenon of violence into art can go both ways. Michelangelo’s bronzes, including his colossal papal statue of Pope Julius II, were melted down into cannons and other weapons during the French Revolution. It’s our choice.

Here are four artists who chose to turn trauma—civil war, natural disasters, apartheid, and female genital mutilation—into sights to behold.



Ralph Ziman's Casspir Project staged re-enactments of events from apartheid South Africa. These armored military vehicles—Casspirs—were fitted with brightly colored beadwork by artisans from South Africa and Zimbabwe.



RALPH ZIMAN, SOUTH AFRICA

An ironclad beast—bulletproof, 10 tons of hardened steel, its 165-horsepower engine roaring at high speeds down narrow streets of black townships, demolishing obstacles in its path and stinking of diesel fuel—has been resymbolized into a masterpiece, embossed with 55 to 60 million multicolored African trade beads, a total change in form and function.

Designed and put into service in apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, the so-called Casspir, a mine-resistant and ambush-protected vehicle, has been subverted. Says South African artist Ralph Ziman: “The Africanization of the Casspir seemed to take away the terror it once evoked ... people felt comfortable to approach it, touch it, and share their stories and memories.” He elaborates on his intention: “To make this weapon of war, this ultimate symbol of oppressing ... to reclaim it, to own it, make it African, make it beautiful, make it shine.”

Born in South Africa in 1963, Ziman grew up in a strict system of institutionalized racial segregation and political and economic discrimination—“apartheid,” which translates in Afrikaans to “apartness.”

“I have vivid memories,” he says of his first sighting of a Casspir. It was April 1993. Charismatic leader Chris Hani had been gunned down outside his house in a Johannesburg suburb by a white nationalist. The artist drove to the funeral and saw columns of Casspirs descending the dusty streets; heavily armed police fired tear gas, shotguns, and automatic weapons. More of the same occurred the next day in Soweto, where police and army units parked their Casspirs along the highway and exchanged gunfire with members of the African National Congress. “Tear gas and smoke burned our eyes and into our memories, along with the sight of armed men on the Casspirs ... for me, covering this beast with beads is catharsis,” says Ziman.

Every single bead of the millions used had to be threaded by hand. The artist used commercially available colors and a computer to create a 3D model of a Casspir, which he flattened to design segmented coverings with traditional African patterns evolved from body painting, mural art, and weaving. The patterns were farmed out to several dozen Ndebele women, who for generations have been South African beading specialists. Most of the wiring was done by Shona men from Zimbabwe.

It took the team of 60 people, working 12-hour days, six days a week for six months, to cover all the surfaces in elaborate panels of brightly colored glass—even the hubcaps, steering wheel, and headlights. Pressure built to finish in time for the debut at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, requiring long hours into the night. On the last day, a group of Zulu women wore traditional dress and serenaded the Casspir as it drove away.



Every bead of the millions used was threaded by hand.

In Ziman's Casspir Project, he used glass beadwork to cover bullets, weapons, and even volunteers posing as military personnel.



**“Our
ritual
sisterhood
was no
more.”**



Using ceramics and metal representing genital cutting, artist Sana Musasama created works of resistance and hope.

SANA MUSASAMA, SIERRA LEONE

The series is called “Unspeakable,” not in the sense of avoidance of something too horrible to address, but rather a silent understanding that makes speech unnecessary. Sana Musasama’s ceramic pieces reflect on the practice of female genital mutilation, which she refers to as “excision,” part of her protectiveness of cultural differences. Excision is closer to the more commonly used term “cut,” she explains, a practice she learned about in the 1970s while living in a Mende village in Sierra Leone. It was only in retrospect that she came to comprehend a concept that has preoccupied her creativity since 1995.

Multicolored and in mixed media, with components ranging in size from 6 to 14 inches long, the installation of around 100 examples of female genitalia on her studio wall defies the cliché of variations on a theme. Musasama’s symbolically rich ceramics include cloth and metal, fiber and paper, gold leaf and organic bark. They feature doorknobs to unlock the womb; spikes, rods, and chains preventive against rape; needles suggesting stitching that can be involved in the procedure; shielding hands and mummified wrappings for healing; protruding eggs and ovaries bespeaking fertility; snaking and tied-up accumulations of scar tissue; and on and on.

“Cutting” is now prohibited in several African countries and elsewhere because of medical risks and complications for sex, childbirth, and other reasons. The procedure spans from a few, small, quick nicks to a far more radical removal of labia, clitoris, and surrounding vulva tissue. It became a hot topic in the 1990s, when Musasama came to understand what happened in Sierra Leone in the 1970s.

Musasama, who is African American, was traveling in West Africa in 1975 when she met a guide in Ghana who invited her to his home village in Sierra Leone. She remained for more than nine months and says she developed a sisterhood with a group of 10-to-15-year-old girls who visited her daily. They combed her hair; tried on her clothes and makeup; and taught her formal greetings in Mende and how to properly sit and eat with her tongue, never allowing food to touch her lips, as well as how to cook on three rocks and wash clothes in the river; how to dance and sing their songs as well as birth and death chants; and how to farm, fish, and repair her clay hut and oven, and more.

Suddenly one morning there were no young girls in the village. They returned 13 weeks later—changed. “Our ritual of sisterhood was no more,” Musasama laments. “They no longer had the sparkle of wonderment in their eyes; they weren’t silly young girls any longer. They didn’t want to have anything to do with me.” She didn’t understand their newfound gravitas until much later. They had been initiated into their lives as mature women, prepared for marriage and motherhood, and that included “excision.”



GONÇALO MABUNDA, MOZAMBIQUE

Gonçalo Mabunda's art materials are, to say the least, unusual: Kalashnikovs (AK-47s), rockets and their launchers, pistols, shell casings—remnants of ordnance from a 16-year civil war largely fought against Mozambique's civilians. In a word, there was “savagery”: mass killing, forced labor, child soldiers, rape, and famine. In a population of 13 to 15 million, 1 million died, another 5.7 million were internally displaced, and 1.7 million became refugees.

Mabunda was 2 years old when the civil war started in 1977, and he has frightening memories of soldiers roaming around, dripping in arms—especially at night. He remembers being impressed by his uncle's AK-47, which he was allowed to hold.

The war ended in 1992. Later, the Christian Council of Mozambique started a project called “Transforming Guns into Hoes,” inspired by the verse from Isaiah: “They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” A remarkable 800,000 weapons were collected.

Already working in metal, Mabunda was one of 10 artists

invited to use the decommissioned arms as art materials, and, to honor all victims, he aimed to incorporate all the kinds of weapons used in the war. His spectacular throne chair series, for which he is most recognized, began innocently enough: He needed a chair while working; afterward, someone came along and wanted to buy it. Then he conceptualized a “throne” laden with irony, referencing African leaders placing themselves in positions of hereditary kingship, holding unto power by force if necessary, a national as well as tribal phenomenon. Yet another variation on African traditions: His wall portraits anthropomorphize the weapons into masks redolent, with Cubist implications, of Picasso and Braque.

“When I compose my works, I try to create beauty out of the burdened material and make people reflect,” he explains. “My intention has been to transform something that was created for evil into something else, something better.”

**A
remarkable
800,000
weapons were
collected.**





**Monnin
rechanneled
“all this
cataclysm”
into
inspiration.**

Artist Pascale Monnin
used concrete,
metal, and glass to
memorialize
Haitians lost in
natural disasters.

PASCALE MONNIN, HAITI

On Jan. 12, 2010, a magnitude 7 earthquake struck near the capital city of Port-au-Prince, the most populated place in Haiti. In 35 seconds, the lives of 3 million people—one-third of the population in the poorest country in the hemisphere—were abruptly changed.

An estimated 300,000 people died; hundreds of thousands more were injured; 1.5 million were displaced, rendered homeless, and sheltered in tent cities. Multistoried concrete buildings collapsed in deadly heaps because of poor construction; monuments such as the Port-au-Prince Cathedral and the National Palace—even the United Nations headquarters—sustained severe damage, as did the national penitentiary, permitting thousands of prisoners to walk away. An estimated 4,000 schools were destroyed, along with desperately needed health facilities. Then came the aftershocks. A 5.9 magnitude aftershock on Jan. 20 demolished many already weakened structures.

Two years after the earthquake, Hurricanes Isaac and Sandy flooded countless acres of crops, exacerbating the food crisis and thwarting recovery. In 2015 and 2016, 1 million people suffered through drought because of El Nino conditions. Then, in October 2016, category 5 Hurricane Matthew delivered a devastating punch to the country’s south, destroying Haitian artist Pascale Monnin’s house. It was a record-breaking and heart-wrenching pummeling by violent natural phenomena.

Monnin rechanneled all this cataclysm into inspiration. Her drawings of the earthquake results, almost unbearably tragic like Goya’s “Disasters of War,” were fundraisers for artist victims of the quake. With her husband, James Noel, she wrote and illustrated a children’s book about the quake, reliving “36 seconds longer than an eternity,” the howling dogs, the neighbor who went mad, the gray sky that Friday morning: “strange to see the cloud formations like the souls of the dead regrouped above our heads.”

That image resonates with “Memorial to the Disappeared,” the faces of children alive at the moment the earth trembled. It is composed of cement and iron, the building materials responsible for mass destruction, and left-behind shards of mirrors and glass. “I added broken mirrors,” she explains, “that reflect light, re-creating beauty, reshaping luminous, solar faces. How to create beauty out of what is broken ... how to wear scars as jewels that grow out of disaster.” They hang in the limbs of a so-called “Mimi blanc” tree, which loses all its leaves but blooms again every January, saluting—ever since its installation in 2015—the disappeared of January 2010. ❖

Andrea M. Couture is a writer in New York City. She has worked in international development, human rights, and the visual arts.

All Women Welcome

It's a warm September morning, and roughly 20 women are gathered in a women-only coworking space in Brooklyn. After brief introductions, a poem honoring the first month of the Muslim calendar, and a hymn from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (widely known as the Mormon church), Abby Stein speaks about the upcoming Jewish High Holy Days.

Stein grew up in a strict Orthodox Jewish community and was assigned to be male at birth. From a young age, she says, she knew she was a girl, but didn't have the vocabulary to describe what she was feeling. Gender roles were so strict in her community that, according to Stein, the concept of being gay or transgender simply didn't exist.

"Forget separate roles," Stein tells me. "Men and women aren't even supposed to interact."

For several years beginning when she was 9, Stein prayed every night that God would make her a girl while she slept. She began questioning her belief in God: "How can I trust my parents and teachers about something as big as God and religion that touches our entire lives when they could be mistaken about something so existential as who I am?"

Stein got married, was ordained as a rabbi, and had a son. But by her early 20s, it wasn't working. She watched YouTube to learn English (she'd previously spoken only Yiddish and Hebrew), studied for her GED, and eventually left the community. She came out as transgender while an undergraduate at Columbia University and is now an activist in both transgender and formerly Orthodox communities.

Stein has found a new home in several LGBTQ-inclusive Jewish spaces, but she finds them limiting. "All of these communities, even

Fighting sexism, racism, and homophobia in your own religious tradition can be exhausting. This multi-faith gathering of women created a space of refuge.





**“How can I trust my
parents and teachers about
something as big as God when
they could be mistaken
about something so
existential as who I am?”**

—Abby Stein

the ones as progressive as they are, they still follow a very set tradition,” she says. At the September gathering, Stein discusses the biblical story of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, who share a deep love that some consider romantic. “If you ask me,” says Stein, with a half-joking grin, “everyone in the Bible is queer.”

Things are different at Sacred Space, a multifaith gathering that meets on the first Sunday of every month. The gathering is both a refuge for women who have left their religious traditions and a seminar for those who still hope to change their faith communities from within. No one religion is playing host. Everyone is welcome to bring their own traditions; only sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of exclusion are off the table.

KICKED OUT

Sacred Space was founded by Kate Kelly and Eboni Marshall Turman, two women who have struggled against the male-dominated leadership of their faith traditions.

Kelly, who grew up in the Church of Latter-day Saints, began to question its strict gender hierarchy while serving on an 18-month mission in Barcelona. “This doesn’t make sense,” thought Kelly, then a student at Brigham Young University. “We do all the same things the male missionaries do, but we can’t perform any of the ordinances or be leaders in any capacity.”

She returned to Salt Lake City, married, and moved to Washington, D.C., to attend law school, but her questions remained. “It’s really difficult to look yourself in the mirror and acknowledge that you participate in an institution that discriminates against you,” she says.

In January 2013, Kelly founded Ordain Women, an organization dedicated to achieving gender equality in the Mormon church. She led a march down to Temple Square in Salt Lake City and asked to be let in to a priesthood session, which women are not allowed to attend.

She now laughs at her younger self for being “painfully” naive. A year and a half into her campaign, an all-male panel of church elders convicted Kelly of apostasy and excommunicated her. She was told she could only return if she gave up her feminist activism.

Today, Kelly lives in New York City and is a human rights lawyer for a gender equality nonprofit. She identifies as queer and is dating a woman. She no longer con-



siders herself a Latter-day Saint, but when we meet for an interview at a cafe, Kelly is wearing a necklace made of 13 gold coins representing the church’s articles of faith. “I never actually left,” she explains. “I committed fully, and then they kicked me out.”

In 2018, Kelly met Marshall Turman, a womanist theologian and professor at Yale Divinity School who had left full-time work as a Baptist minister largely because of gender barriers in her church.

The women quickly swapped tales of the sexism and misogyny they had experienced in their faith traditions. Wouldn’t it be great, they said, if there were a place where they could practice the religions they loved, but without the sexism, racism, and homophobia? By the end of the conversation, Sacred Space was born.

TRAINING WHEELS

At the beginning of Sacred Space, each woman introduces herself by sharing a little about her faith background. At the September gathering, the women identify themselves as Mormon, Jewish, Catholic, Shia Muslim, Eastern Orthodox, Methodist, and Pentecostal.

First-timer Emily Porter tells the group she recently left the Mormon church after coming out as queer. She doesn’t know what exactly she’s looking for, but one thing is clear: “I don’t want anyone telling me who or what God is,” she says.

Candace Taylor was raised Pentecostal. She’s a dancer and prefers to pray to God through movement. Today, she’s with a friend. “This is a space that is safe. I can invite people here and know that they’re not going to be judged,” says Taylor.

Ariella GH Khan was baptized Catholic, but she converted to Judaism, with her mother, when she was a young girl. She moved to New York from Brazil to



attend the Jewish Theological Seminary to become a rabbi. After a research trip to Palestine, she converted to Islam.

“For me, who has been through literally every single Abrahamic religion, it’s a really comforting space, because I get to talk about all the parts of me that make me who I am,” Khan tells me later.

Khan is there with her mother, Marcelle Hohl, who is Jewish and studying to be a rabbi. The two women hold hands throughout the gathering.

Kelly loves the intimacy these introductions build among the women who attend.

“Many people would perceive me to be very tough and very confrontational, and that’s part of who I am,” she says. “But I also want this space to be vulnerable, to weep if necessary, to sing, to celebrate the softness and the sacredness.”

The category of religious “nones” in the U.S. has grown steadily over the past few decades, but polls show that “nones” are not necessarily atheists. Some may not agree with the faith traditions they grew up in, but that doesn’t mean they want to fully abandon those practices.

My friend Melanie Breault joined me on my first reporting trip to Sacred Space and has attended without me since. Breault grew up Jewish but hasn’t identified as religious for many years—she’d likely be described as a “none.” Sacred Space, she says, filled a spiritual need she didn’t know she had. Now she’s considering returning to Judaism. She’s not sure what it will look like, but she knows Sacred Space is part of the puzzle. “It’s like training wheels for my spirituality,” she explains. “I cry every time I go.”

AN OLD, OLD MESSAGE

Marshall Turman, who was raised in black Baptist churches, believes many nones

might return to traditional spaces if those spaces would update their gender and sexual politics.

"We're still preaching this old, old, old message that really proclaims hopelessness" for those who don't fit traditional gender norms, says Marshall Turman. "That's why these churches are emptying out, and people are saying, 'I'm spiritual but I'm not religious.'"

Marshall Turman wanted to preach at an early age, but never thought there would be a place for her. The leadership of the churches she attended was almost entirely male, and the few women who had power were white.

But after taking a theology class at Fordham University taught by a young black woman, she gained a new perspective. The professor "[proclaimed] God from the perspective of black women's experiences and lives," says Marshall Turman. "It completely took my world apart."

Marshall Turman dove headfirst into womanist theology, earning her PhD from Union Theological Seminary. While there, she became the youngest woman ever ordained at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. "It was still a man's world," she says. "I was an assistant minister, a pastor in the church, but I couldn't go into certain meetings because I had the wrong genitalia." The barriers became so frustrating that Marshall Turman left Abyssinian in 2012 to

SHE WAS TOLD SHE COULD ONLY RETURN IF SHE GAVE UP HER FEMINIST ACTIVISM.

pursue a career in academia.

Unlike Kelly, Marshall Turman is still firmly rooted in her faith tradition. She attends church regularly, travels as an itinerant preacher all over the country, and still considers Abyssinian her home. "They can't just vote me out," she jokes. "It doesn't work like that in a Baptist context."

FEMINIST, NOT SECULAR

After the introductions, Sacred Space gatherings often include a song, sometimes even a dance, followed by reflections, prayers, and poetry readings. Each month, a speaker is invited to give a longer address on a spiritual topic.

The founders ensure each gathering represents diverse viewpoints—both in terms of who presents and who is present. Stein's ideal is a "majority-minority" situation, where no single group dominates. Marshall Turman fears that the space "will

become a white woman thing," focusing solely on gender at the expense of race, class, and other systems of oppression. Elevating those who are marginalized should always be the central project of Sacred Space, she says. "Women are very much able to conceive of and practice evil as much as anybody else."

Sacred Space isn't trying to replace traditions; the gatherings wouldn't work without the specific texts, practices, and communities that each woman brings. "We're not just putting everything in a blender and mixing it up," explains Marshall Turman. "We're saying, 'These are our traditions and we're going to distinguish them and we're also going to allow them to speak life to each other.'"

Sacred Space is also a refuge for feminist women who feel uncomfortable talking about faith and spirituality in secular progressive spaces. "You go to a lot of liberal spaces, and it's very negative sometimes," Khan tells me. "It's not easy to be part of those communities if you have a strong spiritual side. I often feel looked down on."

Kelly believes it's hard for many women to come out as religious or ex-religious in feminist spaces because they're often asked to defend the gender politics of their faith traditions. "Secular people have a hard time understanding religious people in any way that's not super pejorative," says Kelly.

At Sacred Space, Kelly can sing a hymn from the Church of Latter-day Saints just because she loves to sing that hymn.

"What we're trying to do is honor who we are," she says. "There is no space where I can be Mormon but not Mormon in quite the same way." ❖

Stephanie Russell-Kraft reports on the intersections of religion, culture, law, and gender. She has written for *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *Religion & Politics*, *In These Times*, and more.





A WAY OUT?

**IS UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME A COMMON-
SENSE WAY TO ENSURE THAT NO ONE
FALLS THROUGH SOCIETY'S CRACKS—OR
A DISTRACTION FROM WHAT WORKERS
NEED MOST? BY DANNY DUNCAN COLLUM**

W

When I told my oldest son I was writing about universal basic income (UBI), he said, “All I know is that the Silicon Valley guys are pushing it, so it must be bad.” And he had a point. UBI has entered U.S. political debate most prominently as Silicon Valley’s favorite solution to a problem mostly of its own creation—massive permanent job loss due to artificial intelligence and robotics.

Under a universal basic income policy, all U.S. citizens would receive from the government a regular, permanent payment of, say, \$1,000 per month, regardless of their other income or employment status. It wouldn’t get rid of the grotesque income inequality in the U.S. In fact, it wouldn’t even guarantee each person a decent standard of living. But it would get everyone up to the official poverty level.

Tech industry UBI proponents include Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Tesla founder Elon Musk, and Amazon kingpin Jeff Bezos. But the idea is most identified with former Silicon Valley entrepreneur Andrew Yang, who made it the defining issue of his long-shot campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Still, UBI is an idea much older and bigger than any of its shadier supporters. While the term “universal basic income” is of fairly recent coinage, the idea that every human deserves some share of the earth’s bounty is an old one. In 1797, one of America’s founding *philosophes*, Thomas Paine, wrote that “the earth, in its natural uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, the common property of the human race.” But, Paine continued, “the system of landed property ... has absorbed the property of all those whom it dispossessed, without providing, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss.”



Paine proposed a single payment at the attainment of adulthood as compensation for the loss of our natural right to the earth. Paine was echoing the ideas of some of the earliest Christian teachers, including St. Ambrose (340–397 C.E.), who wrote: “God has ordered all things ... so that there should be food in common to all, and that the earth should be the common possession of all. Nature, therefore, has produced a common right for all, but greed has made it a right for a few.”

So universal basic income is not just the latest Silicon Valley fad. It’s rooted in an understanding of the origins of wealth and of our obligations to each other that is consistent with both our democratic and religious traditions.

But that still leaves plenty of room for debate about whether UBI is the right solution for America’s most pressing social and economic woes.

HOW WOULD UBI WORK?

Economic debate over the past 50 years has offered a variety of UBI-type proposals, from Richard Nixon’s negative income tax to the social wealth dividend proposed by some contemporary democratic socialists. The best-known and most-debated current UBI plan is the one proposed by the Yang campaign. This version of UBI rests on three pillars:

First, it is “universal.” Everyone gets it, without conditions—from Warren Buffett down to the apparently able-bodied guy with the “Please Help” sign at the exit ramp. That, of course, raises the first blizzard of objections. Why give money to rich people who don’t need it or purportedly irresponsible people who might waste it?

Paying for UBI would almost certainly

involve new taxes on the wealthy, so Warren Buffett wouldn’t be keeping his \$1,000 per month. As to the fear of aiding the “undeserving poor,” it’s true that historically most of the meager social benefits offered in the U.S. are means-tested (for those with the very lowest incomes) and conditional upon some form of good behavior (hours worked, clean drug tests, etc.). This has helped create a culture that stigmatizes public benefits as “welfare” and brands beneficiaries as, if not sinful, at least defective.

As a result, these means-tested benefits, such as TANF, SNAP, Head Start, and Medicaid, can help breed ugly social divisions. Many Americans have incomes just above these programs’ qualifying levels, struggle miserably from paycheck to paycheck, and receive no public assistance at all. That’s a recipe for the kind of resentment that allows demagogic politicians to turn different groups of lower-income people against each other.

On the other hand, universal benefits, such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, or proposed ones such as UBI, single-payer health care, or tuition-free public higher education, build social solidarity, a sense that we are all in this American thing together, putting in what we can and getting back what we need.

Next, a UBI is “basic.” As most advocates envision it, UBI would provide enough money to keep a person alive and sheltered, but not enough to discourage someone from taking a job. Where UBI pilot programs have been implemented, people didn’t quit their jobs or refuse job offers, although some of them did reduce paid work hours to have more time for school or family.

And finally, UBI is “income.” It would have

to be regular, dependable, and permanent money in the bank, something Congress couldn't repeal the first time it wanted to avoid raising taxes.

WHY NOW?

The argument for UBI is founded on an understanding of what's happened in our economy over the past half-century, and where we are headed next. According to the Economic Policy Institute, since the 1970s—due to globalization, automation, and shrinking unions—the incomes of ordinary working people in the U.S. have been stagnant. For men with only a high school education, they have actually been going down.

According to prominent UBI proponents, this is a fact of life unlikely to change. This summer, I read three recent books about UBI (*Basic Income*, by Guy Standing, *Give People Money*, by Annie Lowrey, and *The War on Normal People*, by Andrew Yang). All three of them frankly assumed that the changes wrought by globalization were inevitable. Capital will go where labor costs are lowest. Economic rewards will continue to flow to the managerial-professional elite and, they say, there is nothing we can do about this except ameliorate the damage with UBI.

The new thing UBI advocates see coming is a massive, unprecedented wave of automation. The Andrew Yang for President website claims: "In the next 12 years, 1 out of 3 American workers are at risk of losing their jobs to new technologies." In the post-robot world, many of these replaced workers will never equal their current earnings. If anything, UBI advocates expect wages will continue to go down as more and more people are competing for the few remaining robot-proof jobs.

So if you assume that corporate priorities (i.e. globalization, automation, and union-busting) will continue to drive America's economic policies, UBI makes sense as a way to limit the human toll.

"UBI receives support from economists on the right and left," according to Enoch Hill, an assistant professor of economics at Wheaton College. This, he told me, is because "it's an efficient way to address the plight of the poor. Under the current social safety net, for instance, the loss of unemployment benefits can make it undesirable for an unemployed person to take a low-paying job. UBI doesn't distort the incentive structure the way that means-tested or conditional benefits can. It also could encourage innovation by allow-

Even if one is sold on UBI in theory, there are still plenty of good reasons to be skeptical about it in practice.

ing people to take a lower paying job that involved following a particular passion."

Economist Charles Clark, a professor at St. John's University, pointed out that two giants of economics in the 20th century, Milton Friedman on the right and John Kenneth Galbraith on the left, both supported some sort of universal basic income. To the objection that we can't afford UBI, Clark says, "We were told we couldn't afford Social Security either, and once we had it, it was obvious that we could."

Hill also finds biblical support for UBI. "The Year of Jubilee in the Old Testament," he said, "balances personal responsibility with the reality of generational poverty or societal injustices. So does UBI."

'THE NEXT RIGHT THING?'

So, upon closer examination, UBI could very well be what its proponents claim—a commonsense way to make sure that no one falls through society's cracks. It would write "the least of these" into the social contract, and it's something we probably should have someday. But, sorry Mr. Yang, that still doesn't make it the next right thing to be done in the U.S. today. Even if one is sold on UBI in theory, there are still plenty of good reasons to be skeptical about it in practice.

For one thing, a universal basic income would inevitably lessen the pressure on employers to raise wages. Despite our much-vaunted "recovery" from the Great Recession, American workers still, on the whole, haven't gotten a significant raise. The top U.S. corporations are sitting on enormous piles of cash, and those piles are now growing even faster as a result of the Trump corporate tax cut. However, corporations are mostly using those reserves not to raise pay for long-neglected workers, but for stock buybacks that have the effect of raising share value and thus enriching wealthy investors, including top corporate executives who get much of their pay in the form of stock options. UBI provides no incentive for companies to direct some of their wealth to their workers.

Mainstream economists profess to be mystified that wages haven't gone up more despite recent record-low unemployment rates. But they are ignoring the obvious. In 1954, 34.8 percent of U.S. workers belonged to a union. In 1983, it was 20.1 percent, and today it's only 10.5 percent. In the last half of the 20th century, economic gains for average Americans flowed from the power of organized labor forcing employers to share profits rather than hoard them. UBI

in an economy without unions can only worsen the imbalance of power between employers and workers that is the root cause of our growing economic inequality.

Jane McAlevey has worked in and written about the labor movement for the past 20 years. She recently wrote in *The Nation*: “The proposals being debated today—placing workers on corporate boards, raising the minimum wage, establishing a universal basic income ... aren’t bad ideas. But they are a distraction from what workers need most: power.”

For better or worse, our dominant civil religion is the one founded by Ben Franklin with pithy proverbs such as “Diligence is the mother of good luck.” The Europeans who came to America aimed to replace the inherited aristocracy of the Old World with an earned aristocracy of hard work. The bias in favor of work has deep Christian roots as well. As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si*, “Work is ... part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development, and personal fulfillment.”

Of course, work doesn’t have to mean slaving for a boss or building a business. Most Americans could probably be persuaded that other forms of work—such as homemaking, childrearing, caring for the elderly, nurturance of a community through civic and charitable action—serve the common good and should be compensated by society. But the idea that people should be given a stipend with no strings attached will be perceived by most working Americans as an insult to themselves and their striving ancestors.

Besides, there is no reason to take on this mission impossible when the goals of a UBI can be reached with a public job guarantee and a living wage.

IT’S ALL ABOUT JOBS—AND A LIVING WAGE

The most promising direction for a nationwide job guarantee is suggested by the Green New Deal. If we want to pass on a livable earth to future generations, we have to get to zero carbon emissions by 2050. To do this, we will have to increase taxes on the rich to fund massive public investments in clean energy, upgraded infrastructure, and sustainable agriculture. These projects could generate millions of productive and meaningful blue-collar jobs for displaced factory workers and coal miners, and for people in

UBI in an economy without unions can only worsen the imbalance of power that is the root cause of our growing economic inequality.

inner cities and rural America who have left the workforce. Couple a Green New Deal with an equivalent investment in public education, child-care, and child-rearing, and you’re probably getting close to fulfilling a public job guarantee already.

As for a living wage, moving the minimum to \$15 per hour is a crucial first step. A recent MIT study placed the average income required for an adequate U.S. standard of living at more than \$60,000 per year for a family of four. That would roughly equal the earnings of two adults working fulltime at \$15 per hour. This would at least guarantee a decent life for every two-parent household.

Of course, most jobs should pay more than minimum wage, and families with small children shouldn’t need two fulltime jobs to survive. But raising the minimum wage, indexing it to inflation, and taking measures to encourage union organizing would exert upward pressure on wages across the economy.

Compared to the one-step fix of the UBI, these other measures may seem incredibly complex and even politically impossible, but that’s only because we’re brainwashed by 40 years of corporate propaganda about what we can’t do and can’t afford. During Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, our government did put millions of people to work, rein in finance capital, spur the rapid growth of industrial unionism, and implement an array of universal social benefits.

No doubt, moving toward a Green New Deal with a job guarantee and a living wage for every American will require a massive upheaval in U.S. politics. It will require intense organizing and grassroots mobilization of ordinary people. However, in the process we might find that we’ve not only tackled economic inequality and climate change, we have also rebuilt the ties of solidarity and interdependence in what is now a tragically divided society.

From the birth of the labor and populist movements to the Poor People’s Campaign and beyond, this is how progress toward social justice has always been made in America. It takes ordinary people coming together, face-to-face, across all their cultural divisions, to work for big changes that will serve their common interests and shared values.

When all that’s done, if we still need a UBI, then we can talk. ♦

Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel *White Boy*, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.

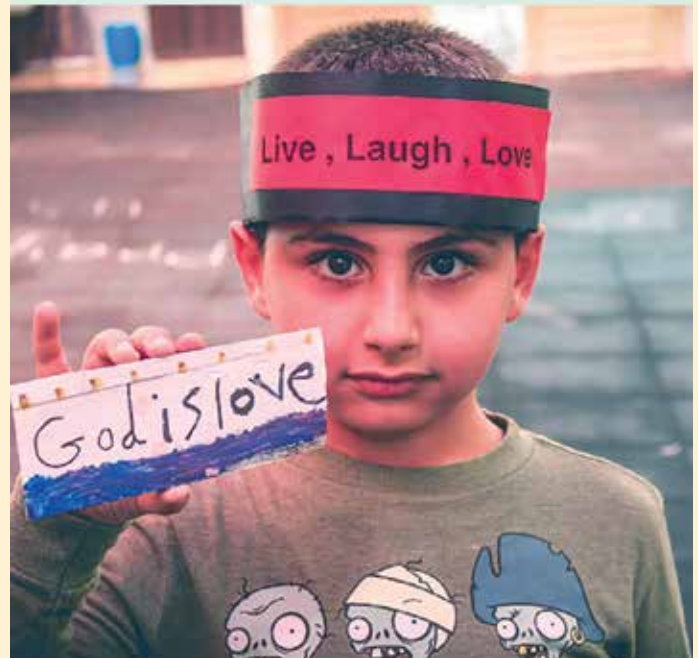
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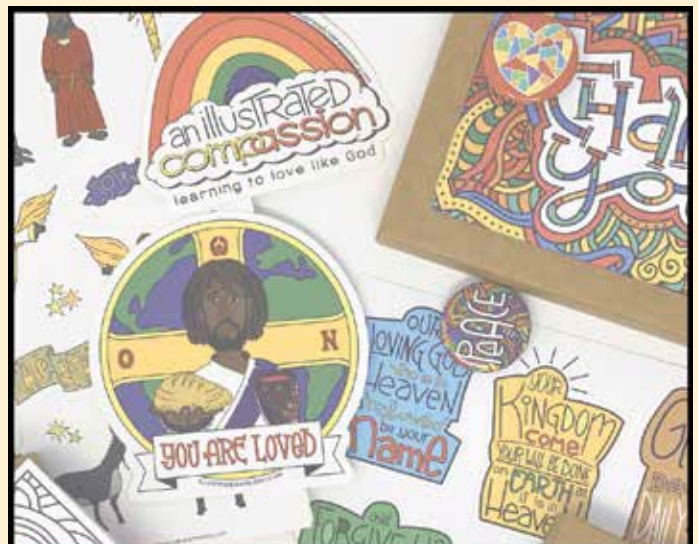
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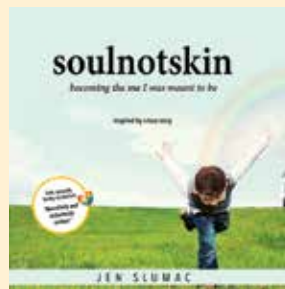
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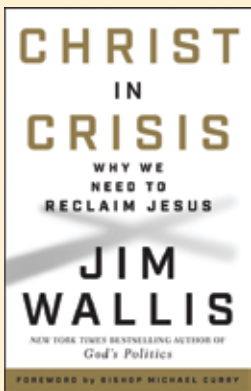
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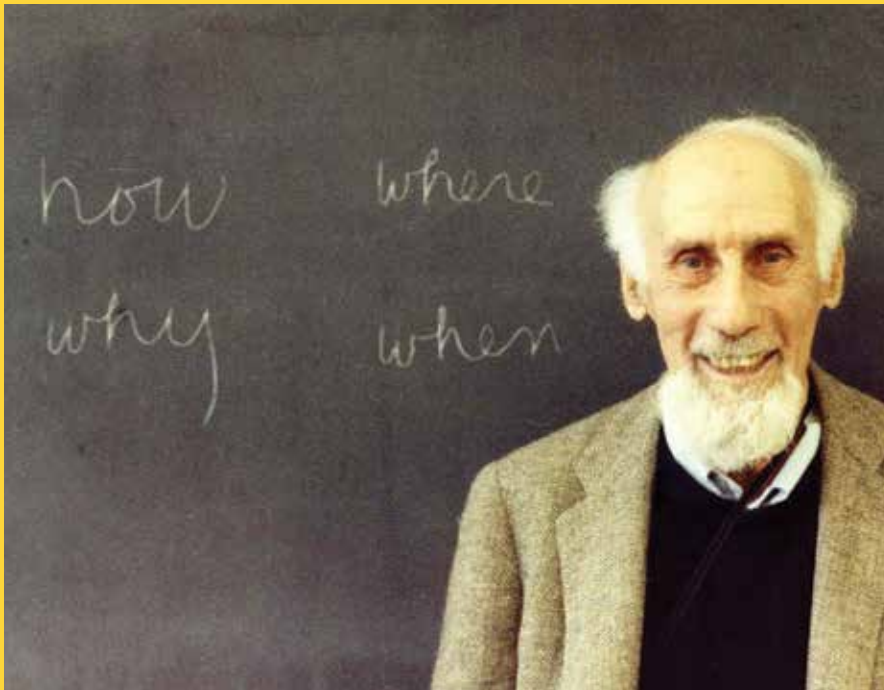
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ROBERT LAX

STILL LEADS US INTO THE HOLINESS OF SILENCE.



In 1948, a hermit was made known to the world by another hermit. Like many Christian holy men, the Jewish-born Catholic contemplative and poet Robert Lax had his early spirituality enshrined in a book: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the bestselling autobiography authored by his friend, the

Poetry

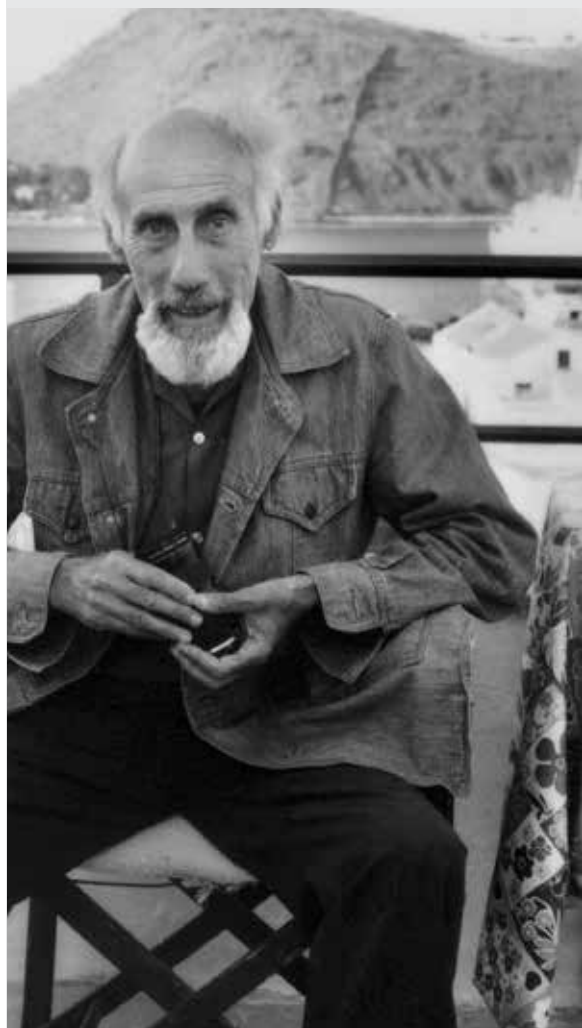
Trappist monk Thomas Merton.

“He had a mind naturally disposed from the very cradle to a kind of affinity for Job and St. John of the Cross,” Merton wrote about Lax. “And I now know that he was born so much of a contemplative that he will probably never be able to find out how much.”

Better known to many for what was written about him than for what

he wrote (and he wrote a lot), Lax, who died in 2000 at age 84, wanted, according to his archivist Paul Spaeth, “to put himself in a place where grace can flow.” For Lax in the 1940s, New York City was not such a place. Though he worked with the poor at Baroness Catherine de Hueck’s Friendship House in Harlem, and had enjoyed jazz with Merton, he balked at the gaspingly fast pace and materialism of the city. He was also unhappily employed at *The New Yorker*.

In 1962, he packed up and moved to



Greece, then an inexpensive country under the warm Mediterranean sun, where he could disappear among the fishermen and sponge-divers of Kalymnos. For almost 40 years the expatriate wrote, prayed, wandered, and drew to him spiritual seekers, fellow poets, and Merton enthusiasts who, his friend Judy Emery remembers, “would just barge into his house,” wanting to engage him in conversation. A World War II conscientious objector, whose final book was titled *The Peacemaker’s Handbook*, Lax immersed the issues of the world in the language of the spirit.

“Lax already considered himself a pacifist by 1939 or 1940,” said Michael N. McGregor, author of the Lax biography *Pure Act* (2015). “This came mainly from his reading about Jesus in the Bible. For him, being a conscientious objector was a spiritual act. The idea that a war may be just didn’t mean anything to him. He didn’t think it right for an individual, he himself, to kill another individual.

“Lax was a very immediate kind of guy. He saw the people at Friendship House doing something that mattered, helping the poor, being with the poor. At *The New Yorker*, he felt that what he was doing didn’t matter. To help the poor was something straight from scripture, from God. The beauty of Lax was that he spent his life trying to

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—from *The
Peacemaker’s
Handbook*,
by Robert Lax

**“THE BEAUTY OF
LAX WAS THAT HE
SPENT HIS LIFE
TRYING TO
FIGURE OUT WHAT
WOULD BRING
HIM CLOSER TO
GOD.”**

figure out what Lax should do, what will bring him closer to God. He wasn’t trying to make big manifestos or statements.”

For Lax, poetry grew out of the same soil as prayer, as meditation. “I believe that in many ways art is an act of love,” he said. His abstract poems, with their vertical lines often consisting of a single word, sometimes a single syllable, empty into the vast white space of silence. A minimalist, he rebelled against our culture of excess and high speed. Lax forced his readers to slow down and absorb every word and syllable before going to the next.

In his prose poem “21 Pages,” Lax reflected on a rigorous kind of waiting, the waiting done by the spirit in its dark night. “When I’m there, you’re there; when I’m not, you’re not. If I’m not here, I’m waiting. Try it again: when you’re here, I am here too, and when you’re not, then I’m not. Where am I when you are not here? I’m nowhere. What am I doing nowhere? Waiting. I’m sitting in (what we’ll call) nowhere, looking into the dark, and waiting.”

The mystery of connecting was something to which Lax was dedicated on every level. Steve Georgiou, a teacher, writer, and Lax devotee from California, wrote extensively about Lax’s method of being:

“Always smiling, sometimes faintly humming, he would slowly pour me a glass of bottled water into one of the two mugs that were usually on the table, and then fill his own cup with equal care. Perhaps nothing would be said at first, but eventually a sound, a poem, an artwork, or an impression would spark an exchange, and there would be a rich flow of meditative, constructive thought. Periodic silences would follow, to which we both listened almost as if the quiet were a third party speaking to us.”

The man who enjoyed reminiscing about his jazz days in New York with Pee Wee Russell and Hot Lips Paige was also a man who saw the spiritual dilemma of our age as the inability to slow down, look inward, listen, discover the truth of wonder, and rejoice in the silent voice of God. ✨

Robert Hirschfield is a poet and journalist in New York City whose work has appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter*, the *Jewish Review of Books*, and other publications. His new poetry collection is *The Road to Canaan* (presapress.com).



'IS THIS THE DEATH OF THE LIGHT?'

By Abby Olcese

Terrence Malick has long been associated with spirituality. The director's philosophy background, poetic style, and love of nature results in art that urges viewers to engage deeply with the world: Ask difficult questions, doubt, and believe.

But *A Hidden Life*, Malick's latest, may be the most faith-oriented film yet from the director of *The Tree of Life* and *The Thin Red Line*. Through the story of World War II-era martyr Franz Jägerstätter, Malick explores what it means to wrestle with Christian conscience during rising xenophobia and violence. Jägerstätter (played by August Diehl) was an Austrian farmer executed for refusing to swear loyalty to Hitler. For Malick's purposes, he becomes an audience surrogate as he encounters his community's reactions to the Third Reich, and later a Christ figure.

Malick spends significant time establishing the beauty of Jägerstätter's life before the war. We're given glimpses of his village and farm, witness romantic moments with his wife, Franziska (Valerie Pachner), and fall in love with them and their home.

But, as Hitler's ideology spreads, Jägerstätter's neighbors change. The mayor (Jürgen Prochnow) spews nationalist rhetoric that brings to mind the language of Donald Trump and his supporters. A miller in town desperately asks, looking into the camera, "Is this the end of the world? The death of the light?" Meanwhile, Jägerstätter must consider: If called to serve in the army for Hitler, what will he do? What part can a farmer in rural Austria play in resisting evil?

There is resonance with how it feels to be a Christian today. We're experiencing mass migration, climate crises, and systemic injustice. But for many of us who don't

live near seats of power, in large cities, or near the border, the direction of world events feels out of our control, and distant. We wonder if maybe these problems don't have to affect us if we don't want them to. Besides, what could we do to change anything?

A Hidden Life answers that question: Even small personal actions carry immense weight, as long as we're willing to stick to our principles when challenged. The lives of everyday Christians such as Jägerstätter force a reckoning with faith and the cost of discipleship. Perhaps we should ask ourselves these same deep questions. ♦

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

**EVEN SMALL
PERSONAL ACTIONS
CARRY IMMENSE
WEIGHT.**

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

In *Clemency*, Emmy winner and Oscar nominee Alfre Woodard plays Bernadine Williams, a prison warden preparing to oversee her 12th execution. Viewers enter Williams' mind as she grapples with executing another prisoner. A film with emotional weight and pertinent themes, *Clemency* raises important questions.

Neon



Triumphalism

The Doctrine of Discovery fueled European colonization of Indigenous land and continues to support institutional racism in America today. In *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*, Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah deconstruct this false narrative of "discovery" and how it is still espoused today.

IVP



Revelation

Good Things Out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends gives additional insight into the life and work of this master of the American short story. Art, ethics, Catholicism, and Southern culture are discussed with depth and humor.

Convergent

ROOM WITH A VIEW

By
Faith-Marie
Zamblé



Curated

A young woman armored in her blazer, caffeinated and tethered to the phone line of a Manhattan hedge fund, hardly seems the optimal audience for an artist whose work

hinges on stillness and contemplation. And yet—if you saw an enormous book of James Turrell’s installations perched on your desk, how could you not open it?

That was my reasoning as I re-encountered Turrell’s oeuvre, third cappuccino in hand. I didn’t know it then, but Turrell’s artistic framework would provide a new way to think about New York City. More specifically, his clarity of vision vis-à-vis light and space stands in contrast to a city replete with people the critic John Berger describes as “resigned to being betrayed daily by their own hopes.”

The city that allegedly never sleeps is wonderful in many ways, but by the end of my tenure there I was increasingly overwhelmed by the hustle, noise, and collective anxiety around, well, everything. Temping at a capital investment firm, while a welcome paycheck, was not my idea of mean-

ingful work, and sitting like a bird in a glass tower, detached from the people below, even less so. Reaching for Turrell’s book, which was likely deemed politically neutral enough for an office setting, was an act of desperation and belief that I could still be surprised, awed even. And I was.

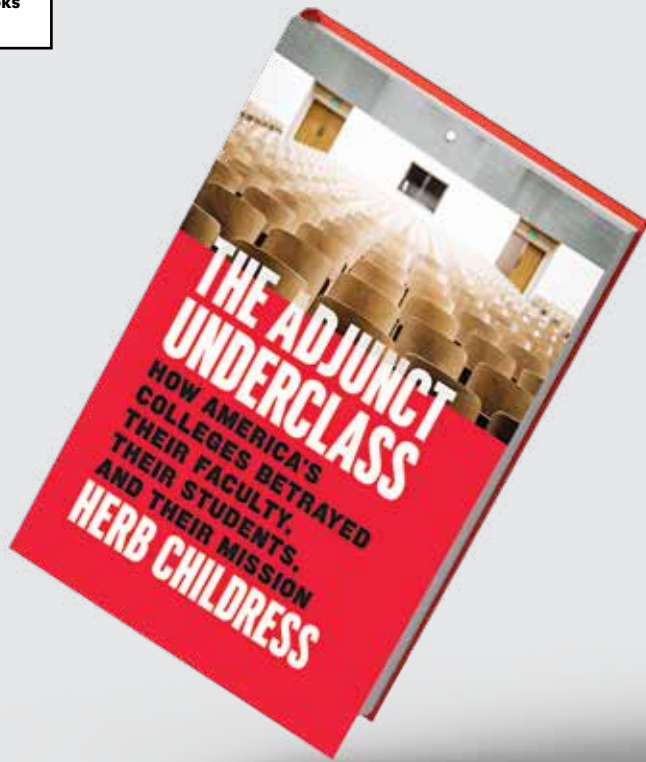
Turrell first came onto my radar four years ago, when quotations of his work appeared in a music video by the rapper-singer-songwriter Drake. I’d never seen anything like it: rooms awash with geometric splashes of light. What Turrell is most famous for, however, are “skyspaces.” Usually a room, either attached to a larger building or solitary, a skyspace features a precisely cut square in its roof that allows you to view the sky above.

Several Quaker meeting houses feature Turrell’s work because he grew up in that tradition. In fact, he has a piece titled “Meeting,” a callback to his Quaker upbringing. This installation at MoMA PS1, an exhibition space in Long Island City affiliated with The Museum of Modern Art, was closed for six months this year, due to a construction company’s infringement into the space with scaffolding that ruined the clarity and purity of the sky. These artistic quibbles seem like the province of eccentrics, but as Long Island City continues to gentrify, Turrell’s adumbration is a gift.

In an often cluttered and imprecise artistic landscape, Turrell’s work is deeply invigorating. His dedication to manipulating elements that have no material trace, like light, and limiting what the viewer sees while leaving the experiential component up to chance, creates the opportunity for beauty and chaos. Most of all, in a city predicated on staid conceptions of power, Turrell’s skyspaces allow the opportunity for something like democracy, a chance to be amazed by the world we live in. Maybe a jittery 23-year-old is the perfect audience for such work after all. ✱

Detail
of James
Turrell’s “Aten
Reign”
(2013)

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.



PAYING THE PRICE OF HIGHER ED

The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission,
by Herb Childress

University of Chicago Press

In *The Adjunct Underclass*, Herb Childress addresses a pressing issue of justice in higher education: the mistreatment of more than half the nation's college instructors. Childress explores the making of adjuncts—contract workers (like rideshare drivers) who teach on a class-by-class basis, earning a fixed rate that is less than half what a “full-time” professor would make for the same work. Most receive no benefits and no assurance of future classes.

After a boom in college attendance 20 years ago and the foolish assumption that population growth and a robust economy were constants, the higher education system is scrambling to make up for greedy mistakes. The price for those mistakes is being paid by teachers, who should be concerned about educating students, not struggling for survival on subsistence wages. And so the real cost is to education itself.

The Adjunct Underclass is masterfully written and

UNIVERSITIES PROCLAIM THEIR OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS—AND YET ALMOST ALL USE THE ADJUNCT SYSTEM.

thorough, covering budgets, expansion, accreditation, hiring, and the ambivalence of tenured faculty. Adjuncts offer horror stories of scraping by while waiting on empty promises of an established position. These stories demand moral outrage.

Sadly, though, the book is a diagnosis, not a prescription. Childress offers no steps to wean universities off these vices, but instead says he wants a systemic overhaul, with schools articulating and standing by their educational mission. It's a pleasant, unrealistic dream.

Recently, I heard the president of a Christian university speak to faculty and staff; it echoed what I've heard at many Christian colleges. First, congratulating the university for its nobility in educating and spiritually forming students. Then speaking of woes over financial burdens, cast in light of the extra load they bear as Christians. Then the reminder that everyone should be proud of sacrifices they make to be the city on a hill. The president noted their distinct advertising: *We* attract students, he said, by offering a quality Christian education, not contemporary campus gimmicks. Minutes later, a sketch of the university's

next big expense was revealed: a sleek dormitory with top-notch amenities and a rooftop patio.

Childress doesn't address religious schools specifically, but I squirm at how on point the book is for the Christian schools I've known. The hypocrisy of universities—assured of their own righteousness and yet participating in this injustice—seems painfully obvious. Yet almost all use the adjunct system.

Most universities' great fear is that they'll have to close their doors. The stakes are larger for those who attach themselves to the name of Jesus. When Christian colleges pride themselves on a higher mission than the typical American university, they must accept the responsibility of that promise. Sadly, most Christian colleges do what they should fear—betray the God on their pamphlets for a convenient injustice, and worse, claim by their actions that Jesus would do the same. ✕

Whitney Rio-Ross has a master's in religion and literature from Yale Divinity School. She teaches as an adjunct in Nashville, Tenn.



THE HEARTH

Soul Space:
Creating Places and
Lives that Make a Difference,
by Linda Lawrence Hunt

Tasora Books



It happens to just about all of us who, in our early adulthood, commit ourselves to a life of globally conscious idealism. We run off to join a cause, maybe commit to a volunteer project for a year or two, come home, and find ourselves overwhelmed by how to create lasting change in a broken world.

Christian writers Jim and Linda Hunt struggled with this question in 1998, not so much as young people but as middle-age adults, after their daughter Krista perished in an accident in Bolivia. Krista and her husband Aaron were three years into their marriage and six months into a three-year service project teaching literacy and microenterprise with the Mennonite Central Committee, when the bus they were in plunged off a ravine.

In 1999, the Hunts decided to create the kind of soul-searching community they would have desired for Krista and Aaron's post-volunteer experience, by founding the Krista Foundation for Global Citizenship, a program to support young volunteers during their service and the first few years of life transitions that follow. In 2001, in the still-gaping hole of Krista's absence, in the same backyard

where she once played and cared for pigmy goats and a horse in the barn, Jim and Linda built a cozy, globally inspired retreat center called the Hearth. They wanted to bring Krista's spirit home to comfort the weary minds of returning service learners.

Linda Hunt's new book, *Soul Space: Creating Places and Lives that Make a Difference*, is a reflection on that experience, one she hopes will help people who want to foster a commitment to lifelong community service in the young people they mentor. Adorned with poetry, recipes, and photos of the young adults who talked, slept, laughed, cooked, and made music at the Hearth, the book's pages are as beautiful as its stories.

Soul Space is a valuable read for anyone wondering how to keep the spark of global service burning. The book highlights the work of young people participating in everything from microfinance projects in the new African economy to the mentoring of homeless youth in the United States' most forgotten pockets of poverty and structural racism. It also recounts how the Hearth has served as a place for wedding and baby celebrations, extended international family reunions, and lifelong friendships across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and manifestations of the Christian faith. *Soul Space* is a beautiful blueprint for contemplation among Christians who believe that true faith requires an enduring dedication to justice around the world. ✕

Above:
The 2018
colleague
cohort of
the Krista
Foundation
for Global
Citizenship

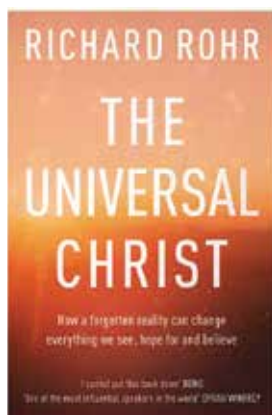
Julienne Gage is a Miami-based journalist who investigates economic development in the U.S. and Caribbean. She was long-time friends with Krista Hunt Ausland.



A WELCOME REMINDER

The Universal Christ:
How a Forgotten Reality Can
Change Everything We See,
Hope For, and Believe,
by Richard Rohr

Convergent



Wisdom rarely surprises. More rarely does it shock or scandalize. Yet, with *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, aims to do both.

He starts with the Incarnation. Was it a startling, once-in-eternity event that explains Jesus Christ's holiness? Rohr suggests instead that the Incarnation is the fundamental pattern for all creation. We live within, and are ourselves a party to, this ongoing incarnation—people, pets, and poppy seeds alike. Nothing lacks the divine impress. In this worldview, “a mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone.”

To underscore this view, Rohr provocatively disentangles the modifier “Christ” from “Jesus.” He reserves “Jesus” for Jesus of Nazareth. “Christ” is for the Divine Presence that has existed in all things since creation, both before and after Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated total, unrelenting acceptance of the divine.

Rohr suggests that, following the great schism of Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054, Western Christendom advocated a restrictive view of incarnation, limiting the broad, beautiful Divine Presence to “the single body of Jesus.” By focusing almost exclusively on Jesus of Nazareth, at the expense of other emanations of the Christ Mystery, Rohr suggests we continue to unduly limit the divine. “To help us recognize and recover the divine image in everything” is, according to Rohr, “the essential work of all religion.”

Rohr's theology is not groundbreaking but its implications are significant. A theology of incarnation urges us toward a view where all is seen as one and embraced in love. Belief in the fundamental presence of the divine in all might put an end to triumphal nationalism whereby some claim God as their own. This also has ecological implications. If we truly believed this earth was imbued with the divine presence, could we continue to exercise unrestrained dominion over her, exploitation for short-term gains?

People unacquainted with the great mystics of the church, or raised on a conservative, literalist Christianity, may feel that pointing to the divine presence in all of material reality diminishes Jesus' stature. Of course, others will hear Rohr's words not as a bolt from out of the theological blue but as a welcome reminder of a truth they've long felt, if not often heard preached.

Jon Little is a freelance writer in Nashville, Tenn. You can find more of his writing at mindfuldaddy.com.

**ROHR BELIEVES THE
ESSENTIAL WORK OF
ALL RELIGION IS TO
“RECOGNIZE THE
DIVINE IMAGE IN
EVERYTHING.”**



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SOJOURNERS

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

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CHRISTMAS EVE

By Pamela S. Wynn



Save for the sun, the nearest star
is more than twenty-five million
million miles away.

What has a single star
shining in Bethlehem
to do with us?

If nothing else, it is this:
Tonight the coiled snake
sleeps. Tonight

a small globe
is pierced by the Light
and the center holds.

Time draws down
to Earth and God
presses his claim on us

to fulfill
the prophecy of Love
once again.

Pamela S. Wynn, a poet and educator, lives in New Brighton, Minn.



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AUDACIOUS HOPE

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle A.

By Kenyatta R. Gilbert



Living the Word

We are living in a moment of ruptured imagination brought on by the growing specter of deadly violence, which

has triggered in many a crisis of faith. But these lectionary readings say to Christians, “Wait a minute, not so fast!” A promise-bearing deliverer has come to topple competing kingdoms and bring distress to wielders of death. Matthew’s message is, “Keep awake.” And the prayerful petitions of the psalms outline the marks of righteous governance: defending the poor, giving deliverance to the needy, and crushing the oppressor (Psalm 72:4).

Salvation comes in the form of a child and angels act as divine emissaries—quieting fear in one instance and stirring up disquiet in the hearts of others (Matthew 2). Were it not for an angel allaying Joseph’s fear about Jesus’ atypical paternity, life as a teenage single parent would have been Mary’s lot. Had an angel not appeared to Joseph in a dream urging him to flee to Egypt, or had a dream not disrupted the course of the Magi warning them to not return to Herod, the scriptural record would have unfolded very differently.

The promise of coming joy and peace reveals much more than incarnational presence. Jesus’ coming brings to our expectant minds the essential nature of a God who wields love and salvation. God always provides a way to secure such provisions. Angelic envoys, as Matthew narrates, stand ready to do God’s bidding.

Kenyatta R. Gilbert, founding director of The Preaching Project, is professor of homiletics at Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. He is author of *A Pursued Justice* and *Exodus Preaching*.

A COMING LORD BRINGS REVERSALS OF CIRCUMSTANCE.

DECEMBER 1

STAY WOKE

ISAIAH 2:1-5; PSALM 122; ROMANS 13:11-14;
MATTHEW 24:36-44

Countless recent events have sought to awaken Christians from spiritual slumber. The invariant strain on community relations and the violence between police and civilians of color have demoralized peace seekers. Violence is old hat. But when it’s normalized in a society that boasts of progressive strides, people cry out in alarm and lament.

Eric Garner’s broad-daylight killing, caught on camera, precipitated a wildfire of events that spotlighted police brutality. Garner’s death suggested that if an unarmed person of his heft could be brought to the ground and choked to death with a billy club by a mob of cops who would later escape indictment, then no opposing force stood a chance against New York’s blue fraternal order. The naked brutality of the scene nudged several thousand into the streets in protest. Five years later, NYPD’s Daniel Pantaleo, the perpetrator, reaped a pink slip, dismissed without pension—a small measure of justice, late on arrival.

Many more instances of violence caught on camera could be mentioned, but Garner’s death was pivotal. To use the terminology of our raging times, it said to vulnerable citizens, “Stay woke!” That is, be vigilant in violent times while adhering to hope. “Wokeness” is postmodern parlance for Matthew’s notion of heeding signs and remaining awake to Jesus’ second coming. Salvation is near. “But about that day and hour no one knows ... Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left ... Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:36, 40, 42).

DECEMBER 8

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

ISAIAH 11:1-10; PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19;
ROMANS 15:4-13; MATTHEW 3:1-12

At the center of *hokmah* (wisdom)—the practical knack for knowing, given on request and grounded in spiritual discernment—is God. For Isaiah, wisdom resembles the righteous relationship between creature and Creator. The readings coalesce around the effect of righteous rule in God’s coming reign. Wisdom and insight, peace

and joy, unity and hospitality, knowledge and reverence, judgment and repentance are the definitive marks of the reign of God. The psalmist's prayer for an anointed king to rule with equity seeks a new created order. According to biblical scholar James L. Mays, this involves honoring the New Testament's exhortation to pray "for kings and all who are in high positions' in a keen awareness of their need and the consequences for the welfare of all in the way they use power." Mays continues, "We do pray for leaders because we want them to be drawn by divine help as close as possible to the model of God's rule."

As difficult as it may be to pray for leaders who obstruct equity for the weak and who shun diplomacy and good sense (*hokmah*), thoughtful praying coupled with service (not merely "thoughts and prayers") prepares the way for the One of whom the prophet spoke: the uncorrupted stem of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1).

DECEMBER 15

THE COMING

ISAIAH 35: 1-10; LUKE 1:46-55;
JAMES 5:7-10; MATTHEW 11:2-11

In graphic detail, Daniel Black's novel *The Coming* transports readers into the holds of the Hope, the Lord Ligonier, and the Good Ship Jesus—slave ships traversing the Middle Passage. These ships came first for farmers, healers, orators, and artisans of West Africa. "They stole away everything that made us strong," Black narrates.

Slave ships came to capture. God forever comes to free. In Isaiah 35, the prophet testifies to a great reversal of circumstance for Judah's exilic, now redeemed, community. Judah will be ransomed by a God who strengthens weak hands, makes firm feeble knees, and says to those of fearful heart: "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God" (35:4). Judah did not—nor will we—get to be the hero of God's story; it is God who comes with salvation to free us.

In James' letter to the diaspora, patience is the prized virtue in expectation of the coming of the Lord (5:7). Endurance has value when coming to grips with suffering (verse 10). James exhorts the Jewish Christians scattered in the wake of Stephen's death to strengthen their hearts and remain unified, "for the coming of the Lord is near" (verse 8). For the diaspora, as with

John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples, news of the Lord's coming provides reassurance because a coming Lord brings reversals of circumstance. That is, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and poor receive good news (Matthew 11:5). In exchange for such reassurance, we jubilantly extol with Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47) and celebrate what makes us strong.

DECEMBER 22

FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE

ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19;
ROMANS 1:1-7; MATTHEW 1:18-25

Who in America signs up for a name like mine, Kenyatta? No would-be assimilationist, for sure. Early in life I understood the power of naming. Many African-American parents with children born in the '70s named them for African freedom fighters to encourage black solidarity. My namesake is Kikuyu-born anti-colonial activist Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president. Jomo forged for himself a mythic identity, undergoing several name changes during his life. (Regrettably, his liberationist legacies acceded to autocratic governing in the end.) As a child he was Kamau wa Ngengi. As a teenager, he took a Christian baptismal name combining the names for apostles John and Peter into "Johnstone." After refusing to fight for the British army, he lived among the Maasai, where he acquired a beaded belt called a *kinyata*. Following this, he began referring to himself as "Kenyatta." Names matter.

The story behind the Hebrew name Emmanuel ("God with us") is foretold by the prophet Isaiah and recalled in Matthew's gospel in its Greek form, Emmanuel. Isaiah's context is not Jesus', but the tasks of birthing and naming are continuous in both

records. Isaiah seeks to give a sign to King Ahaz of a coming child. Matthew details the genealogy, the spiritual power invested in the child, and how this birth inaugurates a new order in the world. An angel quells Joseph's fears, "Do not be afraid ... name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). Whether Isaiah's Emmanuel or Matthew's Jesus, the prophetic promise accompanying these names express Christian hope: "God will save" and "God is with us."

DECEMBER 29

COMING HOPE

ISAIAH 63:7-9; PSALM 148;
HEBREWS 2:10-18; MATTHEW 2:13-23

Hope for some evokes fear in others. As Toni Morrison put it, "The danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one's racialized rank is to lose one's own valued and enshrined difference." Only male infanticide would placate Herod's vexed mind when he perceived a child not of his household threatening his sovereignty. The coronation of Herod's son Archelaus, not Jesus, was supposed to capture the royal consciousness of Judeans (see Matthew 2:16, 22). While the text is silent about the audience to whom the Magi's question—"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:2)—is directed, their inquiry took place within the gaze of Herod's court officials. The gasps, fright, and dismayed stares triggered by the query of these astrological agents caused Herod to consult his own wise men, Jerusalem's municipal aristocracy who had, by the end of Herod's reign when he ordered political opponents killed, become sycophants.

Coming hope breeds hostility. The lust to seize and retain political power with no regard for the collective good is diametrically opposed to God's inbreaking, salvific reign. Perhaps the crucial lesson for Christians who strengthen the hands of despotic leaders is that whether one is forced to hide in Egypt or to come of age in ghettos like Nazareth, God makes sanctuary for asylum seekers and becomes savior for them in their distress (Isaiah 63:7-9). ♦

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H'rumps



'TIS THE SEASON

By Ed Spivey Jr.

Because of President Trump's order to increase tariffs on imports, Christmas shopping this year could be more frenzied than usual. That last shipment of Chinese-made items is selling fast at Walmart, so you've got to shove your shopping cart into the fray if you want to preserve our constitutional right to low prices. Not to complain about Trump's attempts to bring manufacturing back to the U.S., of course. We look forward to our factory smokestacks once again belching the sweet soot of freedom, but it probably won't be in time for Black Friday.

I got a jump on shopping this year by buying that new acupuncture cell phone app. Just released, it's really [ow!] great, although you have to [ow!] hold it just right or [ow!] it doesn't work. Okay there ... *that* pressure point ... No more neck pain. Unless I get a phone call [ow!]. "Hello?" [ow!]

We're especially looking forward to the holidays this year, since getting to Christmas means we made it past Thanksgiving, when for the first time in history the president declined to pardon the White House turkey and, instead—at the urging of adviser Stephen Miller—cooked it and its entire family.

But let's get in the spirit of the season by listing our Christmas wants and wishes for 2019:

- **Google Me Elmo.** (Not sure what it is, but we like the sound of it.)
- **A book that explains the British parliamentary system.** I thought I understood it (I know that "Brexit" is Russian for "stupid idea"), but they lost me when they talked about

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS MEANS WE MADE IT PAST THANKSGIVING, WHICH IS MORE THAN YOU CAN SAY FOR THE WHITE HOUSE TURKEY.

"prorogue." If you say prorogue in Philadelphia, they ask what you want on it. (Philly tip: Never ask for "everything," because it includes a melted, cheese-like substance—presumably petroleum-based—that can't be swallowed without a large Dr. Pepper.)

• **Free college degrees.** In the last election, a major voting block against progressive candidates was Americans without a college degree. So why not give them one? Free college may be a bold plan, but a free degree is even better. It eliminates all that studying and test-taking, two major obstacles to an otherwise enjoyable college experience. A few thousand diplomas—strategically dropped from low-flying aircraft over Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan—and suddenly the Electoral College is just a little-known school without a decent football team.

• **A good razor for Jerry Falwell Jr.** Great beard, but it's totally out of control under the chin, like a Brillo pad that's lost its scouring ability. Note to Jerry: If you want people to respect your leadership in the evangelical world, trim it up a little. And not being a complete hypocrite in your Christian faith wouldn't hurt either. (Maybe I should have listed that first.)

• **A heart for Mitch McConnell.** Not looking for a miracle from the Great Wizard here, but that—and a brain for Donald Trump—would be really nice. (And how about a comb for Bernie Sanders?)

• **A normal childhood for Stephen Miller.** Just guessing, but I can't imagine the mastermind of our brutal immigration policy ever had, you know, playmates. Miller is our Lost Boy, in need of a couple BFFs, a big hug, and a change of scenery from the unending demands of Washington, D.C. (So many innocents, so little time.) How about some volunteer work on the Southern border? I hear social services could use the help. ✖

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

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